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(54) **THIN-FILM SOLAR CELL FABRICATED ON A FLEXIBLE METALLIC SUBSTRATE**

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See application file for complete search history.

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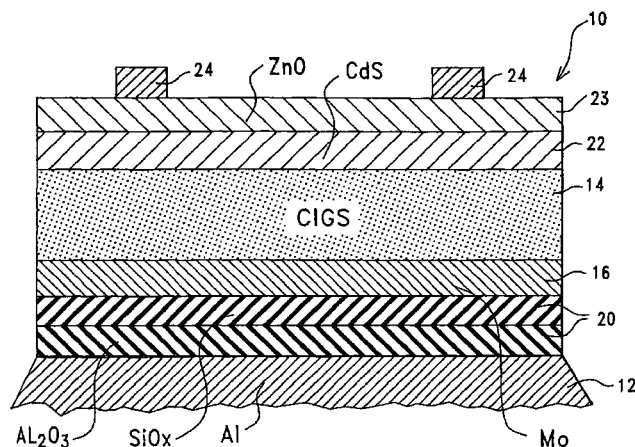
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A thin-film solar cell (10) is provided. The thin-film solar cell (10) comprises a flexible metallic substrate (12) having a first surface and a second surface. A back metal contact layer (16) is deposited on the first surface of the flexible metallic substrate (12). A semiconductor absorber layer (14) is deposited on the back metal contact. A photoactive film deposited on the semiconductor absorber layer (14) forms a heterojunction structure and a grid contact (24) deposited on the heterojunction structure. The flexible metal substrate (12) can be constructed of either aluminium or stainless steel. Furthermore, a method of constructing a solar cell is provided. The method comprises providing an aluminum substrate (12), depositing a semiconductor absorber layer (14) on the aluminum substrate (12), and insulating the aluminum substrate (12) from the semiconductor absorber layer (14) to inhibit reaction between the aluminum substrate (12) and the semiconductor absorber layer (14).

33 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets



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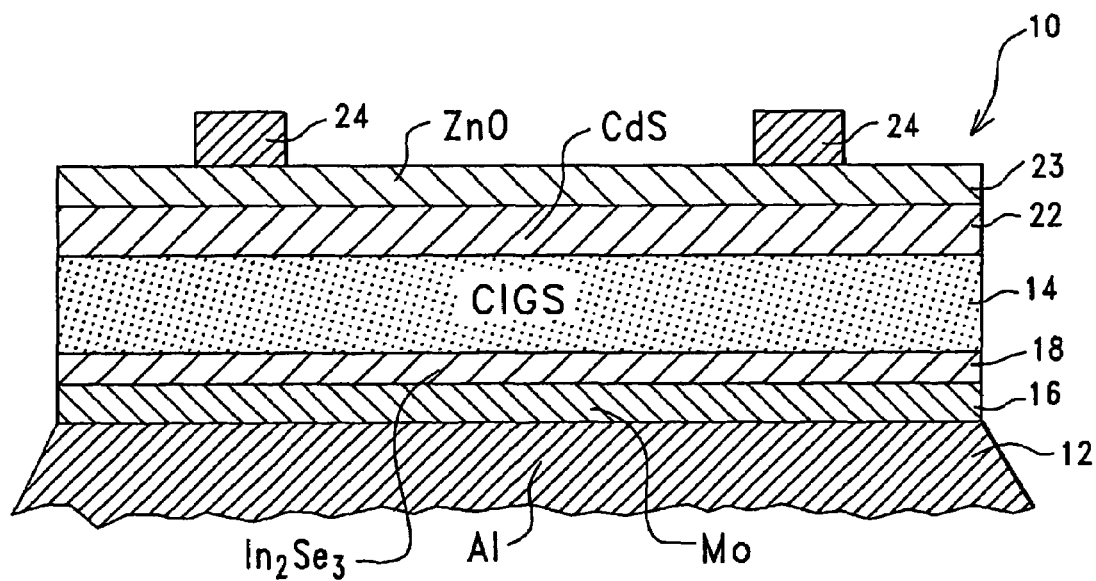
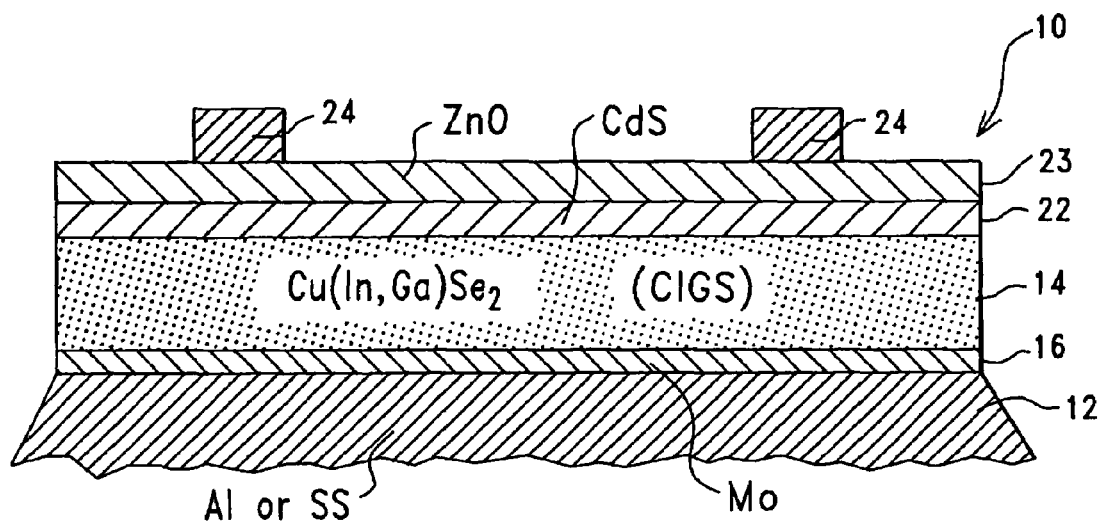
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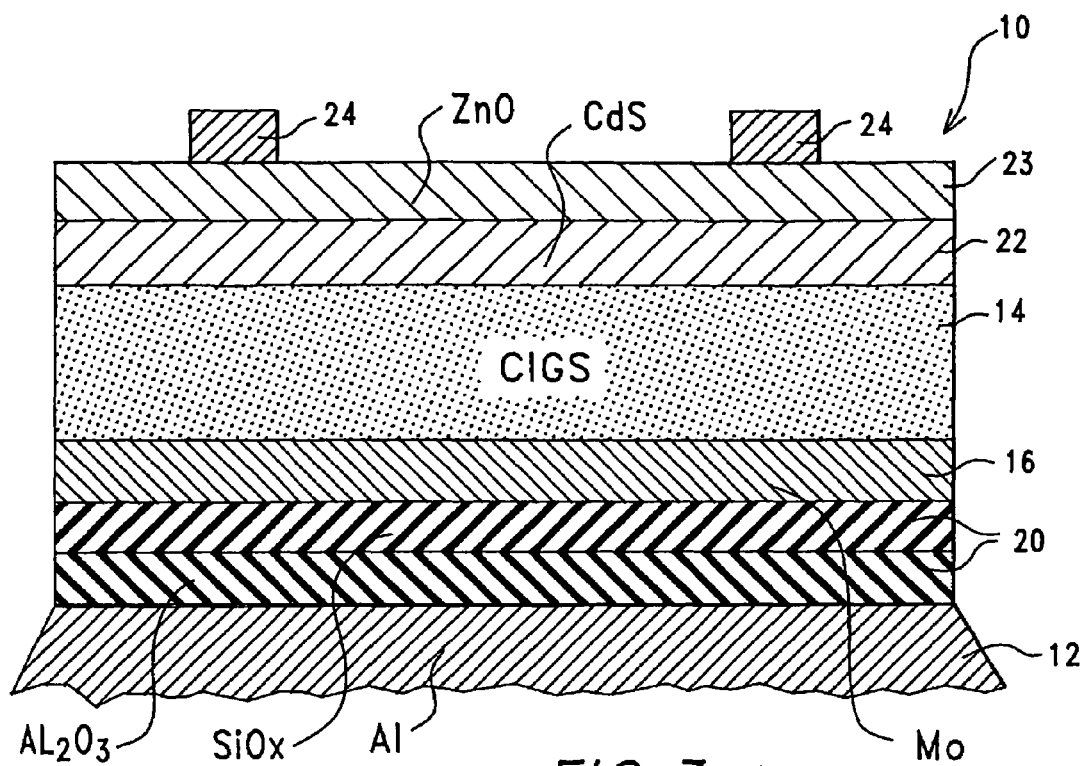


FIG. 3

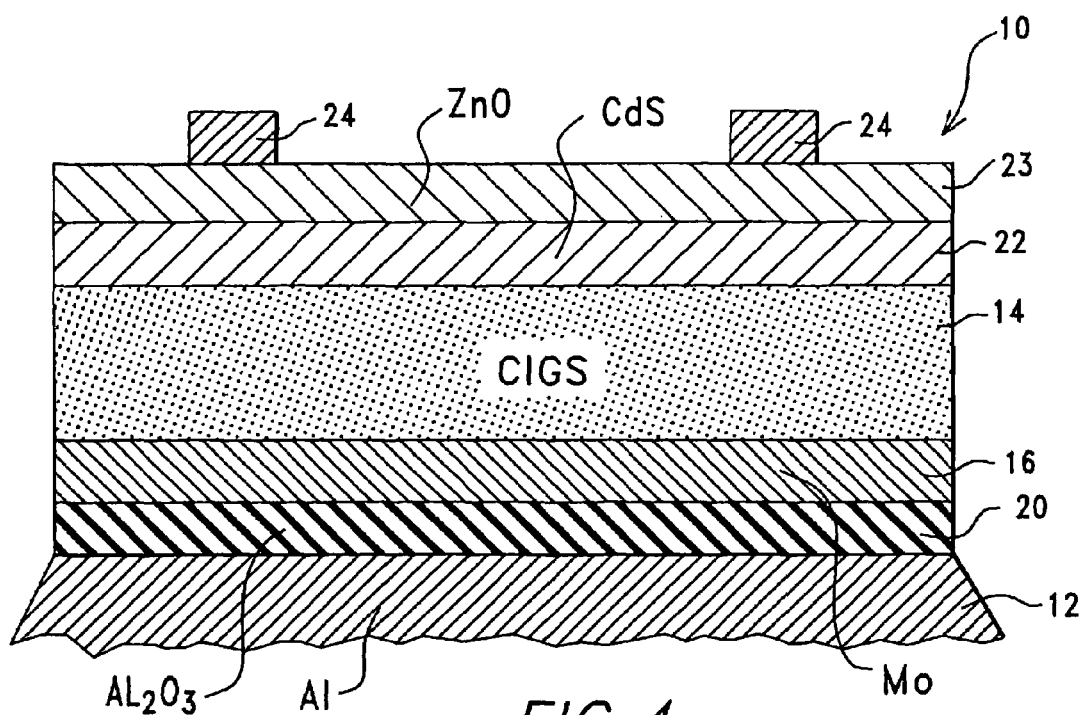
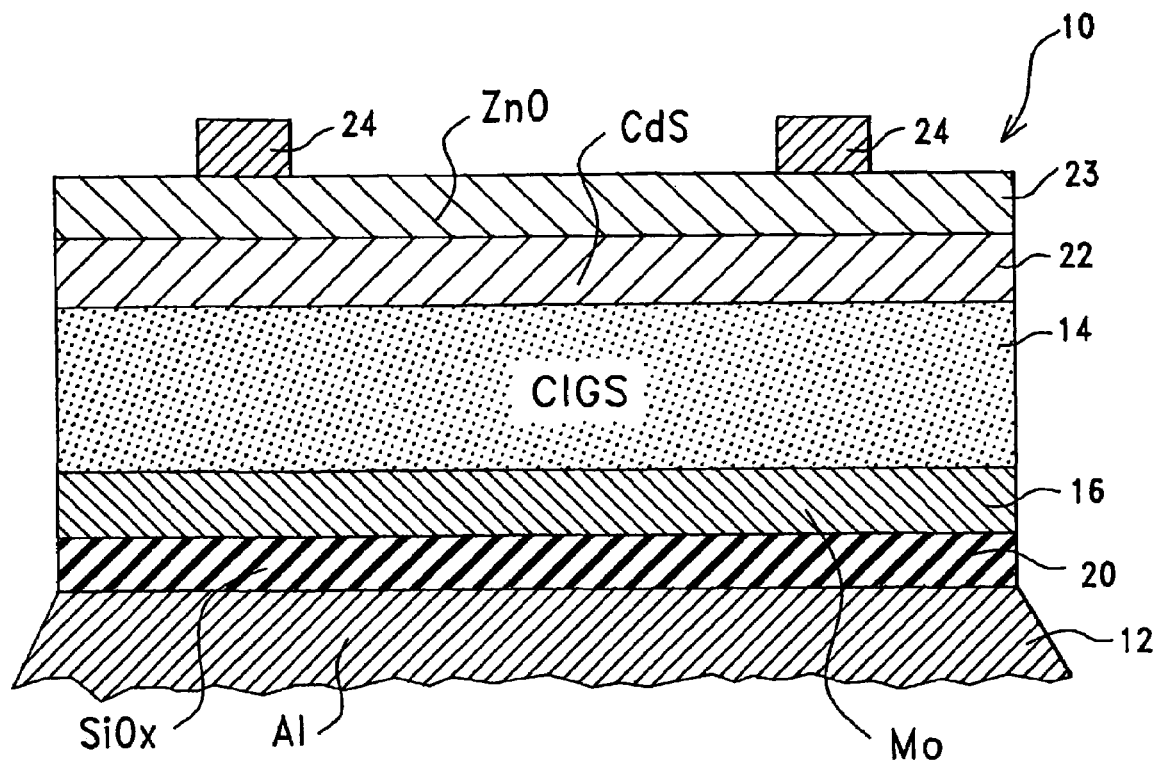


FIG. 4

*FIG. 5*

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THIN-FILM SOLAR CELL FABRICATED ON A FLEXIBLE METALLIC SUBSTRATE

CONTRACTUAL ORIGIN OF THE INVENTION

The United States Government has rights in this invention under Contract No. DE-AC36-99GO10337 between the United States Department of Energy and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, a division of the Midwest Research Institute.

TECHNICAL FIELD

This invention relates generally to a thin-film solar cell and, more particularly, to a thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic aluminum or stainless steel substrate with appropriate means for inhibiting reaction between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber.

BACKGROUND ART

Photovoltaic devices, i.e., solar cells, are capable of converting solar radiation into usable electrical energy. The energy conversion occurs as the result of what is known as the photovoltaic effect. Solar radiation impinging on a solar cell and absorbed by an active region of semiconductor material generates electricity.

In recent years, technologies relating to thin-film solar cells have been advanced to realize inexpensive and lightweight solar cells and, therefore, thinner solar cells manufactured with less material have been demanded. This is especially true in the space industry with the solar cells powering satellites and other space vehicles.

The current state of the art in solar cell design is to deposit a photoactive material onto a dense substrate. Typically, the substrate was constructed of glass or a low expansion glass ceramic with densities of approximately 2.2 gms/cc (2200 mg/cc) or higher. Accordingly, the weight of an array or battery of such prior art solar cells is a determining factor in the size of the battery system to be launched into space due to payload weight constraints. Heavy solar cells increase the cost of positioning the satellite into orbit and the operating costs by reducing the payload of the satellite and increasing the launch weight. A lighter weight cell substrate would provide savings in size and weight thereby translating into an increased size for satellite photovoltaic energy systems, which implies higher reliability and accessibility of the satellite throughout its life cycle.

Accordingly, there exists a need for a thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate which is inexpensive to manufacture. Additionally, a need exists for a thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate which is lightweight and reliable for use in space vehicles and other applications. Furthermore, there exists a need for a thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate wherein the flexible metallic substrate is an aluminum substrate or a stainless steel substrate with appropriate means between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber for inhibiting reaction between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber.

DISCLOSURE OF INVENTION

The present invention is a thin-film solar cell comprising a flexible metallic substrate, either aluminum or stainless steel, having a first surface and a second surface. A back metal contact layer is deposited on the first surface of the

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flexible metallic substrate. A semiconductor absorber layer is deposited on the back metal contact layer. A photoactive film is deposited on the semiconductor absorber layer forming a heterojunction structure. A grid contact is deposited on the heterojunction structure.

The present invention additionally includes a solar cell for converting solar radiation into usable electrical energy. The solar cell comprises an aluminum substrate and a semiconductor absorber. Means between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber inhibit reaction between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber.

The present invention further includes a method of constructing a solar cell. The method comprises providing an aluminum substrate, depositing a semiconductor absorber layer on the aluminum substrate, and insulating the aluminum substrate from the semiconductor absorber layer to inhibit reaction between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber layer.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and form a part of the specification, illustrate the preferred embodiments of the present invention, and together with the descriptions serve to explain the principles of the invention.

In the Drawings:

FIG. 1 is a sectional view of a thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate, constructed in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a sectional view of another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate, constructed in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 3 is a sectional view of still another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate, constructed in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a sectional view of yet another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate, constructed in accordance with the present invention; and

FIG. 5 is a sectional view of still yet another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell fabricated on a flexible metallic substrate, constructed in accordance with the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

As illustrated in FIG. 1, the present invention is a thin-film solar cell, indicated generally at 10. The thin-film solar cell 10 has a flexible metallic substrate 12 preferably constructed from an Aluminum (Al) material or a stainless steel material and a semiconductor absorber layer 14 deposited on the flexible metallic substrate 12. The surface of the flexible metallic substrate 12 can be polished (to benefit the film structure of the absorber layer 14 and morphology) or it may be textured (to increase the path length of the reflected light). A chromium adhesion layer, although not always required, can be added to increase adhesion, i.e., a chromium adhesion layer between approximately 100 Å and 400 Å. Furthermore, the flexible metallic substrate 12 can be thin and flexible, i.e., approximately 25 µm to approximately 100 µm, in order that the thin-film solar cell 10 is lightweight, or the flexible metallic substrate 12 can be thick and rigid to improve handling of the thin-film solar cell 10.

In an embodiment of the present invention, the semiconductor absorber layer **14** is a deposition of high quality Cu(In, Ga)Se₂ (CIGS) thin films providing the fabrication of a high efficiency thin-film solar cell **10**. Example processes of deposition of the semiconductor absorber layer **14** are described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,436,204 and U.S. Pat. No. 5,441,897, which are assigned to the same assignee of the present application and are hereby incorporated by reference. It should be noted that the deposition of the CIGS thin film **14** onto the flexible metallic substrate **12** can be by any of a variety of common techniques including, but not limited to, evaporation, sputtering electrodeposition, chemical vapor deposition, etc.

While the deposition of the CIGS thin film **14** has been demonstrated before on other metal foil substrates such as Titanium and Molybdenum, the fundamental hurdle for the deposition of CIGS thin films **14** onto the Aluminum substrate **12** is that the Aluminum in the Aluminum substrate **12** reacts with the Selenium in the CIGS thin film **14** to form Al₂Se₃ (an unstable compound in air). Furthermore, at high temperatures, the Aluminum within the Aluminum substrate **12** alloys with the Copper, Indium, and Gallium in the CIGS thin film **14**. With the reaction between the Aluminum and the Copper and the alloy of Aluminum with the Copper, Indium, and Gallium, the Aluminum substrate **12** would be essentially consumed during the deposition of the CIGS thin film **14** on the Aluminum substrate **12**. A requirement for a properly functioning thin-film solar cell **10** is that the substrate be inert to the film deposited on the substrate.

In order to overcome the consumption of the Aluminum substrate **12** with the CIGS thin film **14** during deposition of the CIGS thin film **14** onto the Aluminum substrate **12**, the inventors of the present application discovered that a layer of suitable back metal contact (i.e., conductive metal layer) **16** can be deposited on one or both surfaces of the Aluminum substrate **12** between the Aluminum substrate **12** and the CIGS thin film **14**. The back metal contact layer **16** protects and isolates the Aluminum substrate **12** from the fluxes of the Selenium in the CIGS thin film **14** during the deposition of the CIGS thin film **14** onto the Aluminum substrate **12**. Preferably, the back metal contact layer **16** is constructed from a Molybdenum (Mo) material. The Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16** preferably has a thickness between approximately 0.1 μm and approximately 1.0 μm although having a Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16** with a thickness less than approximately 0.1 μm and greater than approximately 1.0 μm is within the scope of the present invention. Furthermore, it should be noted that other back metal contact layers **16** besides a Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16** can be used including, but not limited to, a molybdenum/gold combination, nickel, graphite, etc., (all which have been commonly employed in conventional solar cells).

In addition, as illustrated in FIG. 2, when depositing the CIGS thin film **14**, a seed layer **18** of In₂Se₃ or (In,Ga)₂Se₃ can be deposited on the Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16** which also adds protection of the Aluminum substrate **12** from the CIGS thin film **14**. The seed layer **18** of In₂Se₃ is then followed by the CIGS thin film **14** deposition scheme as described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,436,204 and U.S. Pat. No. 5,441,897, for instance. While the Molybdenum back metal contact layer **14** is sufficient to protect the Aluminum substrate **12**, the In₂Se₃ seed layer **18** is an added protection at the start of the CIGS thin film **16** deposition, but will end up reacting with the Copper, Indium, Gallium,

and Selenium fluxes during the CIGS thin film **14** growth, and is accounted for in the final CIGS thin film **14** composition.

In a variation of the above-described CIGS thin film **14** deposition scheme, as illustrated in FIGS. 3, 4, and 5, an insulation layer **20** of one or more oxides of silicon (SiO_x), and/or Al₂O₃ (preferred) can be deposited on the Aluminum substrate **12** followed by the Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16**. The insulation layer **20** serves as an additional protection for the Aluminum substrate **12** with the Molybdenum back contact layer **16**. The primary function, however, of the thin insulation layer **20** is to allow the use of CIGS thin films **14** on the Aluminum substrates **12**, in monolithically integrated modules, based on CIGS solar cells. In this configuration, the Aluminum substrate **12** must be electrically isolated from the Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16** in order to accomplish the monolithic interconnect of individual solar cells into a module. In monolithic interconnect CIGS modules, the Aluminum substrate **12** serves as the substrate and the one or more oxides of silicon (SiO_x), and/or Al₂O₃ insulation layer **20** serves as an electric isolation between the Aluminum substrate **12** and the Molybdenum back metal contact layer **16**. The Molybdenum back contact metal layer is the back contact and the CIGS thin film **14** is the absorber.

Therefore, the thin-film solar cell **10** of the present invention can be constructed in at least the following two variations:

1. Al/Mo/CIGS/CdS/ZnO. This structure is for a single, stand-alone thin-film solar cell **10**.
2. Al/(Al₂O₃ and/or SiO_x)/Mo/CIGS/CdS/ZnO)). This structure is necessary for monolithic interconnected modules made up of several thin-film solar cells **10** and can be used for the single, stand-alone thin-film solar cell **10**.

In yet another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell **10** of the present invention, the Al₂O₃ insulation layer **20** can be deposited on the Aluminum substrate **12** by any of a variety of common techniques including, but not limited to, evaporation, sputtering electrodeposition, chemical vapor deposition, etc. In still another embodiment of the thin-film solar cell **10**, the Al₂O₃ insulation layer **20** can be constructed by anodizing the Aluminum substrate **12**. The anodization essentially converts the surfaces of the Aluminum substrate **12** to Al₂O₃ by electrolytic means. It should be noted that in this embodiment, the adhesion layer between the Aluminum substrate **12** and alumina, as described above, is not necessary.

To complete the construction of the thin-film solar cell **10**, the CIGS can be paired with a II-VI film **22** to form a photoactive heterojunction. In an embodiment of the present invention, the II-VI film **22** is constructed from Cadmium Sulfide (CdS) although constructing the II-VI films **22** from other materials including, but not limited to, Cadmium Zinc Sulfide (CdZnS), Zinc Selenide (ZnSe), etc., are within the scope of the present invention.

A transparent conducting oxide (TCO) layer **23** for collection of current is applied to the II-VI film. Preferably, the transparent conducting oxide layer **23** is constructed from Zinc Oxide (ZnO) although constructing the transparent conducting oxide layer **23** from other materials is within the scope of the present invention.

A suitable grid contact **24** or other suitable collector is deposited on the upper surface of the TCO layer **23** when forming a stand-alone thin-film solar cell **10**. The grid contact **24** can be formed from various materials but should have high electrical conductivity and form a good ohmic contact with the underlying TCO **23**. In an embodiment of

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the present invention, the grid contact **24** is constructed from a metal material, although constructing the grid contact **24** from other materials including, but not limited to, aluminum, indium, chromium, or molybdenum, with an additional conductive metal overlayment, such as copper, silver, nickel, etc., is within the scope of the present invention.

Furthermore, one or more anti-reflective coatings (not shown) can be applied to the grid contact **24** to improve the thin-film solar cell's **10** collection of incident light. As understood by a person skilled in the art, any suitable anti-reflective coating is within the scope of the present invention.

The thin-film solar cell **10** is singular in nature and has variable size, ranging from approximately 1-cm² to approximately 100-cm² or even larger. In order to series connect singular thin-film solar cells **10**, the thin-film solar cells **10** must be separated by cutting or slitting the flexible metallic substrate **12** and then reconnecting the grid contact **24** of one thin-film solar cell **10** to the flexible metallic substrate **12** of another thin-film solar cell **10**. In the monolithic integration, the monolithic integrated scheme can be followed to connect the thin-film solar cells **10**.

The thin-film solar cell **10** of the present invention provides a great advantage over conventional solar cells. The thin-film solar cell **10** with the flexible metallic substrate **12**, as described herein, is lighter, less space consuming, and less expensive than using glass or other metallic substrates. Lightness and size are especially useful in space applications where these criteria are important factors. Furthermore, the thin-film solar cell **10** of the present invention can be rolled and/or folded, depending on the desires of the user.

The foregoing exemplary descriptions and the illustrative preferred embodiments of the present invention have been explained in the drawings and described in detail, with varying modifications and alternative embodiments being taught. While the invention has been so shown, described and illustrated, it should be understood by those skilled in the art that equivalent changes in form and detail may be made therein without departing from the true spirit and scope of the invention, and that the scope of the present invention is to be limited only to the claims except as precluded by the prior art. Moreover, the invention as disclosed herein, may be suitably practiced in the absence of the specific elements which are disclosed herein.

The embodiments of the invention in which an exclusive property or privilege is claimed are defined as follow:

1. A thin-film solar cell comprising:
 - a flexible aluminum substrate having an anodized first surface;
 - an electrically conductive back metal contact layer deposited on the anodized first surface of the flexible aluminum substrate wherein the anodized first surface electrically insulates the aluminum substrate from the electrically conductive back metal contact layer;
 - a semiconductor absorber layer deposited on the back metal contact wherein the semiconductor absorber layer is constructed from a film selected from the group consisting of Cu(In,Ga)Se₂, CuInSe₂, CuGaSe₂, CuInS₂, and Cu(In,Ga)S₂;
 - a photoactive film deposited on the semiconductor absorber layer forming a heterojunction structure; and
 - a grid contact deposited on the heterojunction structure.
2. A monolithically integrated module comprising a plurality of the thin-film solar cells of claim 1.
3. The monolithically integrated module of claim 2 wherein the anodized first surface electrically isolates the aluminum substrate from the back metal contact layer of

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each of the plurality of thin-film solar cells to thereby allow for interconnection of the solar cells.

4. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein the back metal contact is constructed from a Molybdenum (Mo) material.

5. The thin-film solar cell of claim 4 wherein the Molybdenum material has a thickness between approximately 0.1 μm and approximately 1.0 μm.

6. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein the aluminum substrate comprises an anodized second surface.

7. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein the photoactive film is constructed from Cadmium Sulfide (CdS).

8. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 and further comprising:

a transparent conducting oxide for collecting current.

9. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein the grid contact is constructed from metal.

10. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 and further comprising:

an (In,Ga)₂Se₃ layer deposited between the back metal contact layer and the semiconductor absorber layer.

11. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein the anodized first surface comprises Al₂O₃ formed by anodizing the substrate.

12. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 and further comprising:

an insulation layer of one or more oxides of silicon, deposited on the anodized first surface.

13. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 and further comprising:

an insulation layer of one or more oxides of silicon, deposited between the substrate and the back metal contact layer.

14. The thin-film solar cell of claim 1 wherein at least the anodized first surface of the aluminum substrate is anodized thereby forming Al₂O₃.

15. The thin-film solar cell of claim 6 wherein the anodized second surface of the aluminum substrate is anodized thereby forming Al₂O₃.

16. The thin-film solar cell of claim 6 wherein the anodized second surface of the substrate is protected with one or more oxides of silicon.

17. A solar cell for converting solar radiation into usable electrical energy, the solar cell comprising:

an aluminum substrate;

a semiconductor absorber;

an electrically conductive back metal contact layer between the substrate and the semiconductor absorber;

Al₂O₃ between the substrate and the back metal contact layer, the Al₂O₃ formed by anodizing the aluminum substrate wherein the Al₂O₃ electrically insulates the aluminum substrate from the electrically conductive back metal contact layer; and

an In₂Se₃ layer deposited between the back metal contact layer and the semiconductor absorber.

18. The solar cell of claim 17 wherein the semiconductor absorber is a Cu(In, Ga)Se₂ (CIGS) thin film.

19. The solar cell of claim 17 wherein the back metal contact layer comprises Molybdenum (Mo).

20. The solar cell of claim 17 wherein the anodizing occurs without use of an adhesion layer.

21. The solar cell of claim 17 and further comprising:

an insulation layer of one or more oxides of silicon on the Al₂O₃ between the Al₂O₃ and the back contact layer.

22. A monolithically integrated module comprising a plurality of the solar cells of claim 17.

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23. A method of constructing a thin-film solar cell, the method comprising:

providing an aluminum substrate;

depositing a Cu(In, Ga)Se_2 (CIGS) thin film semiconductor absorber layer on the aluminum substrate; and

insulating the aluminum substrate from the semiconductor absorber layer to inhibit reaction between the aluminum substrate and the semiconductor absorber layer wherein the insulating comprises anodizing a surface of the aluminum substrate to thereby form a layer of Al_2O_3 that insulates the aluminum substrate from the semiconductor absorber layer.

24. The method of claim **23** wherein the anodizing occurs without providing an adhesion layer.

25. The method of claim **23** wherein the aluminum substrate is insulated from the semiconductor absorber layer by a back metal contact layer.

26. The method of claim **23** and further comprising:

depositing an In_2Se_3 layer between the substrate and the semiconductor absorber layer.

27. The method of claim **25** and further comprising:

depositing an insulation layer of one or more oxides of silicon, on the layer of Al_2O_3 between the layer of Al_2O_3 and the back contact layer.

28. A thin-film solar cell comprising:

an aluminum substrate that comprises an electrically insulating layer of Al_2O_3 formed by anodizing the aluminum substrate;

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a semiconductor absorber layer; and

an $(\text{In,Ga})_2\text{Se}_3$ layer deposited between the substrate and the semiconductor absorber layer.

29. The thin-film solar cell of claim **28** further comprising a back metal contact layer between the substrate and the semiconductor absorber layer.

30. The thin-film solar cell of claim **29** wherein the $(\text{In,Ga})_2\text{Se}_3$ layer is deposited on the back metal contact layer between the back metal contact layer and the semiconductor absorber layer.

31. A monolithically integrated module comprising a plurality of the thin-film solar cells of claim **28**.

32. A method of constructing a thin-film solar cell, the method comprising:

providing an aluminum substrate that comprises an electrically insulating layer of Al_2O_3 formed by anodizing the aluminum substrate;

depositing an In_2Se_3 layer on a layer supported by the substrate; and

depositing a semiconductor absorber layer on the In_2Se_3 layer.

33. The method of claim **32** further comprising constructing a monolithically integrated module of a plurality of the thin-film solar cells.

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